Public Health
Seattle & King County
HEALTHY PEOPLE. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES.
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PANDEMIC FLU FACT SHEET

General Questions

What is pandemic influenza?

Influenza viruses cause infections of the respiratory tract (breathing tubes and lungs). In some persons, complications of influenza can be severe, including pneumonia.
Pandemic influenza is a global outbreak of disease from a new influenza A virus that is unlike past influenza viruses. Because people have not been infected with a similar virus in the past, most or all people will not have any natural immunity (protection) to a new pandemic virus.

How is a pandemic different from regular flu season?

A pandemic flu is a new influenza virus that could be a much more serious flu virus than seen in a typical flu season. Different from the typical strains of flu, humans would have no or little natural resistance to a new strain of influenza. As a result, pandemic flu is likely to be more severe, affect more people, and cause more deaths than seasonal influenza.
Also, there is a vaccine for seasonal flu, which is prepared each season against new variations of the seasonal influenza. There is no vaccine available at this time for a pandemic flu, and it is expected to take at least six months after a pandemic flu appears to develop a vaccine.

Why is pandemic influenza so serious?

Because most or all people would not have immunity to a new pandemic virus, large numbers of persons around the world can be infected. If the pandemic virus causes severe disease, many people may develop serious illnesses. Some of those who develop severe influenza will die.
Once a pandemic virus develops, it can spread rapidly causing outbreaks around the world. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predicts that as much as 25% to 30% of the US population could be affected. In King County alone, a severe pandemic flu could make 540,000 people ill, 270,000 would need outpatient care, over 59,000 would need hospitalization, and 11,500 could die. High levels of illness and death during a pandemic could lead to other forms of social and economic disruption. With so many people in so many places becoming ill, caring for the ill, and looking after their children at home, the available workforce will be reduced. Impacts of a pandemic on everyday life may include school and business closings, the interruption of basic services such as public transportation and food delivery, and cancellation of large public gatherings.

Can pandemic flu be prevented?

Public Health – Seattle & King County is working with federal, state, and other local government agencies to respond to pandemic influenza and to maintain essential health care and community services if an outbreak should occur. In fact, governments all around the world are preparing for the possibility of a pandemic outbreak under the leadership of the World Health Organization.
It is not possible to prevent or stop a pandemic once it begins. A person infected with influenza virus can be contagious for 24 hours before the onset of symptoms, and for five to seven days thereafter, making it extremely easy for the virus to spread rapidly to large numbers of people.

Although the federal government is stockpiling medical supplies and antiviral drugs, no country in the world has enough antiviral drugs to protect all their citizens. Anti-viral drugs can be used to treat severe cases as long as there was a reasonable chance that the drugs might help save lives. Antiviral drugs might also be prioritized for people who work in essential occupations, such as health care workers.

Other strategies for slowing the spread of a severe influenza outbreak could include temporarily closing schools, sports arenas, theaters, restaurants, taverns, and other public gathering places and facilities. There currently is no vaccine to protect humans against a pandemic influenza virus because the pandemic virus has not yet fully developed. However, vaccine development efforts are under way to protect humans against a pandemic influenza virus that might develop from the current bird flu virus in Asia. (See information on bird flu below).

When is pandemic influenza A expected?

Influenza pandemics occur naturally. There were 3 pandemics in the 20th century. The pandemic of 1918-19 was the most severe pandemic on record, in which 50 million or more persons around the world died, including approximately 650,000 Americans.

It is not possible to predict accurately when influenza pandemics will occur or how severe they will be. However, the current outbreak of avian influenza in Asia, Europe, and Africa has influenza experts concerned that a pandemic is developing that may be severe.

Why does the current bird flu outbreak in other parts of the world pose a risk of causing a pandemic influenza A outbreak in humans?

New human influenza viruses arise from bird influenza viruses that then change to a form that can infect humans and spread readily from person to person. The current bird flu outbreak in Asia is caused by a type of influenza A virus called “H5N1.” The H5N1 outbreak among domestic chickens and ducks in Asia, Europe, and Africa is widespread and uncontrolled. Human infections and deaths due to the avian H5N1 virus have occurred. Most of these cases involved direct or close contact with infected birds or surfaces possibly contaminated from feces of infected birds. However, at this time, the virus has not developed the ability to pass easily from person to person and cause outbreaks in humans.

What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?

The reported symptoms of bird flu in humans have ranged from typical influenza-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections (conjunctivitis), pneumonia, acute respiratory distress, viral pneumonia, and other severe and life-threatening complications.

What can the public do to reduce their risk of pandemic influenza?

Stay informed. These web sites provide regularly updated information about bird flu and pandemic flu:

- Public Health - Seattle & King County
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Get this free guide: Pandemic Influenza Planning: Guide for Individuals and Families. The guide includes checklists and information on how to prepare for a potential pandemic.
- For information on the vaccine development process, visit the National Institutes of Health

Stop germs from spreading.

- Wash your hands frequently.
  - Wash thoroughly with warm water and soap for 20 seconds.
  - Make sure to wash your hands before eating, or touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
  - If caring for ill persons, wash hands after providing assistance.
  - Always wash your hands after sneezing, blowing your nose, or coughing, or after touching used tissues or handkerchiefs.
  - If hand washing is not possible, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose and eyes.
- When coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with tissue, or cough and sneeze into your upper sleeve. Put used tissues in the trash.
- Don't share items such as cigarettes, towels, lipstick, toys or anything else that might be contaminated with germs.
- Don't share food, utensils or beverage containers with others.

Stay home when you are sick.

- See your health care provider as soon as you can if you have a cough and a fever, and follow their instructions, including taking medicine as prescribed and getting rest.
- If asked, use a mask when visiting your health care provider.
- Visit Public Health's Stop Germs web site for more information and educational materials on stopping germs and staying healthy.

- **Sign up for Public Health News Alerts.**

- If you plan to travel overseas, check the **CDC web site for travel advisories**.

How is pandemic influenza spread?

Pandemic influenza would be spread from person to person primarily through "respiratory secretions," the same way seasonal influenza viruses and other common respiratory infections spread. Respiratory secretions are virus-containing droplets (such as spit or mucous) that are spread when infected persons cough or sneeze. These droplets can then land on the surfaces of the mouth, nose, and throat of persons who are near (i.e., within 3 feet) the ill person. The virus may also be spread through contact with the infectious respiratory secretions on the hands of an infected person and other objects and surfaces.

Adults can spread influenza virus one day before symptoms appear and up to five days after the onset of illness.

Will the regular (seasonal) flu shot provide any protection against the pandemic influenza virus?

Probably not. But the regular flu shot will protect you against the influenza viruses that are circulating right now.

If large numbers of people have the flu during a pandemic, will if affect my ability to get in to see a doctor?

Yes. Even if there is mild pandemic, doctors' offices will be busier than usual. But if there is a severe pandemic, there may be as many as 540,000 ill people in King County alone during an 8-week period, with 270,000 needing outpatient care and nearly 60,000 requiring hospitalization. These large numbers

of sick people may overwhelm hospitals and clinics that may simultaneously be experiencing substantial staff shortages due to illness.

Be prepared for changes in the healthcare system. For example, it may be difficult to get medical care or to talk directly to your healthcare provider. There may not be enough medical supplies, healthcare providers, and hospital beds for all persons who are ill. As a result, healthcare providers will need to make tough decisions about who receives medical care and how much treatment can be administered.

What can I do if I can't get in to see a doctor during a pandemic?

Vacant hospital beds may be scarce, but most people who get a pandemic flu virus can be cared for at home. (See our Information for Caring for Someone with the Flu) During a pandemic, updated information and advice will be available on this Public Health website and through a telephone hotline. Alternate medical care facilities will also be set up throughout King County to ease the burden on hospitals and clinics. Be prepared to follow instructions from your healthcare provider and public health officials about how to obtain medical care. Health care information and hotline numbers will be broadcast over local news media and on this website.

See information on "When a Pandemic is Present" next…

When a Pandemic is Present

What is the best way to protect myself from pandemic influenza?

Begin now to practice simple but important habits that reduce the spread of germs:

- **Wash your hands frequently.**
  - Wash thoroughly with warm water and soap for 20 seconds.
  - Make sure to wash your hands before eating, or touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
  - If caring for ill persons, wash hands after providing assistance.
  - Always wash your hands after sneezing, blowing your nose, or coughing, or after touching used tissues or handkerchiefs.
  - If hand washing is not possible, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose and eyes.
- When coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with tissue, or cough and sneeze into your upper sleeve. Put used tissues in the trash.
- Don't share items such as cigarettes, towels, lipstick, toys or anything else that might be contaminated with germs.
- Don't share food, utensils or beverage containers with others.
- **Stay home when you are sick.**
  - See your health care provider as soon as you can if you have a cough and a fever, and follow their instructions, including taking medicine as prescribed and getting rest.
  - If asked, use a mask when visiting your health care provider.
  - Visit Public Health's Stop Germs web site for more information and educational materials on stopping germs and staying healthy.
- Minimize your exposure to ill people as much as possible. During a flu pandemic, this may mean avoiding large social gatherings and events, such as concerts, movie theaters, and sports venues.

Should I buy Tamiflu (oseltamivir) for my home?

Tamiflu is a prescription antiviral drug that works against influenza viruses. It is not known if it will be useful against a pandemic influenza virus. Tamiflu is not recommended for persons to keep at home in case of a pandemic.

Will there be enough Tamiflu for everyone if there is a global pandemic influenza outbreak, and if not, who will get it?

The federal government is stockpiling medical supplies and antiviral drugs (such as Tamiflu) and King County is also purchasing a supply for this region. However, there is simply not enough Tamiflu available for any country in the world to protect all their citizens.

Public health officials have recommended using available supplies of Tamiflu to first treat persons with severe infections that require hospitalization, and persons that will perform vital functions that the public will need in a pandemic. These groups include healthcare workers and emergency responders.

During a pandemic, Tamiflu is not recommended to prevent influenza infections because using the drug for this purpose requires daily doses for weeks. The limited supply of Tamiflu means that it must be saved to treat those who are severely ill.

Tamiflu is currently manufactured by one company in Switzerland. Government agencies and the manufacturer of Tamiflu are attempting to find ways to is negotiating with generic drug companies to increase production of the medicine.

Should I wear a mask at work to protect myself from pandemic influenza?

Masks are recommended for use in health care settings by ill persons and healthcare workers to prevent spread of infection. At this time, masks are not recommended for use by well persons in the community. There is no guarantee that masks would prevent the spread of the infection in the population.

If persons decide to wear masks during a pandemic influenza outbreak, it is likely they will need to wear them any time they are in a public place and when they are around other household members.

More information on the use of masks from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Do I need to disinfect surfaces that have been in contact with a person with influenza?

Yes, wipe down any surfaces that may have been contaminated by saliva or other respiratory secretions.

Influenza viruses are known to survive on non-porous surfaces such as steel and plastic, for up to 24 to 48 hours after inoculation and from cloth, paper, and tissues for up to 8 to 12 hours. Viable virus can be transferred from non-porous surfaces to hands for 24 hours and from tissues to hands for 15 minutes.

Use a household disinfectant labeled for activity against bacteria and viruses, an EPA-registered hospital disinfectant, or mix and use 1/4 cup chlorine bleach with 1 gallon of cool water.

Why does it take so long to develop a pandemic influenza vaccine?

Vaccine production is a complicated and lengthy process. Because viruses change over time, a specific pandemic influenza vaccine cannot be produced until a pandemic influenza virus emerges in humans. Once a pandemic influenza virus has been identified, it will likely take 4-6 months to develop, test, and begin producing a vaccine.

In preparation, the U.S. government is making efforts to increase manufacturers' ability to produce vaccine. Research is also underway to develop new ways to produce vaccines more quickly.

See information on "Bird Flu" next…

Bird Flu

If I feel "fluish," should I ask my doctor to perform a particular test to check for the bird flu virus?

Only if you have a recently returned from travel to an area where bird flu is present. Depending on your symptoms, dates of travel, and activities, additional testing might be recommended. Let you healthcare provider know about your travel history and if you had contact with poultry or bird markets.

Is bird flu (or avian flu) the same thing as pandemic flu?

No. Pandemic flu is a global outbreak of human disease. It is caused by a new influenza virus that is unlike any previous flu, so people will not have any natural immunity to it. The lack of immunity means that a pandemic flu can pass readily from person to person, creating widespread illness. Currently, there is no pandemic flu circulating.

Bird flu (or avian influenza) refers to a large group of different influenza viruses that primarily affect birds. On rare occasions, these bird viruses can infect other species, including pigs and humans, but the vast majority of avian flu viruses do not infect people.

The current bird flu outbreak in many parts of the world is caused by a type of influenza virus called "H5N1." H5N1 is already spreading widely in global bird populations. In a very small number of cases, it has passed from birds to humans--generally through direct contact with infected birds—and in a handful of cases, it has passed from human to human. In the few instances of avian flu in humans, it has been deadly, killing nearly half of those infected. However, H5N1 remains a bird flu because it has not developed the ability to pass easily from person to person. If this change occurs, H5N1 will become a human influenza virus that could start a pandemic—and that's what worries health experts.

Is it safe to eat chicken, poultry, and eggs?

Yes, eating properly cooked poultry, as well as eggs, is safe. The U.S. government has banned imported poultry from countries affected by bird flu. At the present time, bird flu is not present in the U.S.

For protection against many types of food borne diseases, such as Salmonella, all poultry should be cooked to 165º F or hotter. Cooking also destroys flu viruses. Eggs from infected poultry could be contaminated with the virus, so avoid eating raw or lightly cooked eggs in such foods as raw cookie dough, homemade mayonnaise, and dressings made with raw eggs. For more information on safe food preparations, visit Public Health's web site at www.metrokc.gov/health/foodsfty/foodtemps.htm

I live near people who keep chickens and other poultry? Am I safe?

This does not present a risk. At the present time, the H5N1 strain of bird flu that has spread through poultry farms in southeast Asia and into eastern Europe is not present in the U.S. Even if the H5N1 strain were to appear in the U.S., transmission from birds to people would require close contact with birds, such as handling, butchering or exposure to bird droppings.

I have a bird feeder and a bird bath in my yard. Is this safe?

Maintaining a clean bird feeder or bird bath is generally safe, unless these are attracting rodents or raccoons. It is always best to wear protective gloves when handling or cleaning these items to avoid

contact with bird droppings or contaminated water in a bird bath. Always wash your hands with soap and water after doing these chores.

Does owning a caged pet bird increase the possibility of catching or spreading avian flu?

The likelihood of getting a pet bird that is already infected with avian flu is very low. It is illegal in the U.S. to import pet birds from regions that are infected with bird flu. In addition, if you're concerned and already own a pet bird, keep it inside to avoid exposure to wild or migratory birds.

If you are buying a new bird, especially of an exotic variety, be sure it has been legally imported. Smuggled birds from affected areas could possibly be infected with the bird flu virus. Information about federal embargoes on bird importation can be found at www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/outbreaks/embargo.htm

Can bird flu virus spread to my pet dog and cat?

There is no evidence that bird flu is a risk to dogs. Recently, there have been reports of a canine influenza virus in the U.S. but this is a different flu virus that affects only dogs. There is evidence from the Asian outbreak that the bird flu virus might affect cats fed raw poultry, but there is currently no cause for concern because the virus is not present in the U.S.

What is being done to monitor for bird flu among domestic poultry in this area?

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) currently has two programs designed to monitor for bird flu. They are testing samples of fresh eggs grown in the state for antibodies to the virus. They also have a program in conjunction with the Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory that tests domestic poultry for bird flu virus. Persons owning poultry that died of an unknown cause can inquire about bird flu testing by calling the WSDA at 360-902-1881 or 360-902-1878.

What is being done to monitor for bird flu in wild birds?

Several agencies are conducting surveillance for bird flu among wild birds, especially migratory waterfowl. Surveillance is being strengthened in certain parts of the country such as Alaska because it is believed that migratory birds like ducks and geese could carry bird flu there from Asia and Russia.

A fact sheet about the ecology of bird flu (avian influenza) viruses in wild bird populations can be found at the National Wildlife Health Center's website.

What should I do if I find a dead bird?

Public Health is continuing to monitor bird deaths as part of its West Nile virus prevention program. Dead birds found in King County should be reported to Public Health by using the web-based report form at www.metrokc.gov/health/westnile/deadbird.htm or by calling by calling 206- 205-4394 during business hours Monday-Friday 8 am – 5 pm.

You may dispose of the dead bird by double bagging in plastic bags and discarding in your household garbage. Use gloves or a shovel to avoid touching the bird or any other dead animal with your bare hands.

I have a small flock of chickens in my backyard. Are there any special precautions I should take to keep them from getting bird flu?

You should practice good sanitation and preventive measures, such as reducing exposure to wild birds, to guard against a variety of diseases. Excellent information on “backyard biosecurity for the birds” is available www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/hpai.html

If birds in your flock die unexpectedly, you can report this to the Washington State Department of Agriculture at 360-902-1881 or 360-902-1878; testing for bird flu may be recommended as part of the state’s monitoring program.